

PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY

Sociology translates to public action . . .

This occasional column highlights sociologists who successfully engage sociology in the civic arena in service to organizations and communities. Over the years, members of ASA and sociologists as individual professionals and citizens have sought to make the knowledge we generate directly relevant to our communities, countries, and the world community. Many sociologists within the academy and in other sectors practice the translation of expert knowledge to numerous critical issues through consultation, advisement, testimony, commentary, writing, and participation in a variety of activities and venues. Readers are invited to submit contributions, but consult with Managing Editor Lee Herring (herring@asanet.org, 202-383-9005 x320) prior to submitting your draft (1,000 to 1,200 words maximum).

Wages and Working Conditions at Cal

by Amy Schalet, Center for Reproductive Health Research & Policy, University of California-San Francisco, and Gretchen Purser and Ofer Sharone, University of California-Berkeley

A few years ago, inspired by student-worker activism springing on campuses across the country and by research journalist Barbara Ehrenreich's popular work *Nickel and Dimed: On (not) Getting By in America*, the idea was born to study working conditions at the University of California-Berkeley (UCB). At the time, all three of us were graduate students in the Sociology Department. In our different ways, each of us had worked on issues of economic inequality and justice—Gretchen had been president of a student labor group at her undergraduate institution; Amy had designed and taught an undergraduate seminar to educate students about the benefits of European-style welfare state programs; Ofer had studied overwork and unemployment. Until that point, none of us had turned our sociological research skills and passions for social justice toward the university community of which we were part.

Finding the Message

The idea was simple: Take our tools as budding social scientists and use them to bring to light the wages and working conditions of the UCB service and clerical staff. Our goal was not just to report on the stark numbers regarding wage stagnation and inequality—though we did use whatever quantitative data we could find—but to use our training in qualitative methods to go beyond numbers and show the human face and experience of those who did the day-to-day work of keeping our university running. With the guidance of Barbara Ehrenreich, who joined our research collective for a month in the fall of 2001, a group of ten graduate students began to conduct in-depth interviews with custodians, food service workers, groundskeepers, and clerical workers. We were assisted also by a number of undergraduates who were taking Amy's welfare-state course.

We could not know at that time that three years later our eventual research report would be held up as a prime example of Public Sociology at the 2004 Annual Meeting of the Sociological Association. Instead, we made time to do the research, while preparing for qualifying exams, doing MA research, and writing dissertations. We struggled to work together effectively in a large group of independent-minded graduate students. We begrudgingly let go of our theoretical concepts to make the writing accessible to all. But the research process was deeply compelling—few of us had previously sat down to learn about the lives and experiences of university workers. The discussions about how to frame our research for maximum impact

were exciting—and Barbara Ehrenreich’s perspective as a journalist was absolutely vital to these framing debates. The teaching rewards were unmistakable—undergraduates “got” topics like inequality and poverty, which are so difficult to teach, in a much deeper way after they had interviewed the very workers who clean their class rooms and prepare their food.

After nearly 70 interviews and many, many hours of debate, writing, and editing, we self published the results of our research in a 34-page report, titled *Berkeley’s Betrayal: Wages and Working Conditions at Cal*, at the end of August, 2004. The report is divided into three sections: wages, health and safety, and dignity and respect. The wages chapter shows that university workers are struggling to stay afloat financially. While recent years have seen striking increases in the salaries of UCB’s top administrators, more than 90 percent of UCB’s custodians and food service workers do not earn enough to cover their basic household expenses such as housing, transportation, and childcare.¹ To make ends meet, some workers are forced to cram their family into a small apartment; others postpone getting braces for their children. Many employees take second or even third jobs.

Surprisingly, health and safety is also an area of great concern, even though university workers have health benefits, a rarity for comparable jobs in the private sector. One problem is that workers complain about lacking the equipment they need to perform their duties safely. Food service workers, for instance, report not being provided with the slip-resistant shoes they need to maneuver safely around wet kitchen floors. Workers also tell of foregoing treatment of work-related injuries for fear of termination or other reprisals. These fears are well founded as numerous workers across occupations report suffering from retaliation after asking supervisors for safety equipment or going out on disability.

Falling Short on Respect, Inclusion, Mission

When we began talking with UCB workers, we expected to hear about inadequate wages. What took us aback, however, was just how often and how intensely workers felt disrespected, excluded, and betrayed by the university. There are many reasons for this experience of betrayal—among them, lack of recognition for workers’ efforts and contributions, lack of a fair and consistent system for receiving promotions, lack of oversight over supervisors, lack of access to any of the university’s educational opportunities. But many also feel betrayed to see the university stray from its educational mission. Like professors and students, campus workers often come to work at the university out of a deep desire to contribute to its educational mission. They are disturbed then to see big contracts between the university and corporations that result in corporate interests setting the research agenda. Kim, a student affairs officer, says she believes “the university will pretty much do anything for money. At some point, Sather Gate will be called McDonald’s Arches. The question is, for how much?”

In the months since we published *Berkeley’s Betrayal*, we have been overwhelmed and deeply gratified by responses from workers, faculty, students, and the media. We have received thousands of requests for the report, now in its second edition. And we have received hundreds of emails from students, faculty members, and workers across the state writing to corroborate our findings and share additional stories from Berkeley and other campuses. Even more powerful has been the tremendous energy we have witnessed at our speaking engagements on various campuses, as workers, students, and faculty members speak and listen to each other, often for the first time, and strategize about how to improve working conditions on campus.

¹ According to the California Budget Project, for a two working parent family of four both parents would need to earn \$16.88 per hour in order to achieve a modest standard of living. Using 2002 University wage data, the authors calculated that 1,690 University workers are making less than \$16.88.

As gratifying as these outcomes have been, as one administrator at a private East Coast University wrote to our website, “It is tough all over. Your work may have just begun.”

Indeed, the work has only just begun, and we hope that the work won’t just be *our* own. On the Berkeley campus, a new student group has formed to work with unions, and members of the faculty, to exert pressure on the university to commit the resources necessary to improve wages and working conditions. But much more research and organizing are called for. We have received many requests to take our project in new directions (e.g., to translate *Berkeley’s Betrayal* into Spanish, to research other campuses, to interview administrators to understand how the factors that shape their decisions about resource allocation, to name a few). It is our hope that sociology graduate students and faculty will use *Berkeley’s Betrayal* as a teaching tool and as a source of inspiration to initiate similar projects at their own campuses.

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